

A Study on the Characteristics of 20th Century Women's Undergarments

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Abstract

This study aims to classify women's undergarments of the 20th century by periods, and to examine their characteristics. The research method consists of a literature study based on relevant documentary records and a demonstrative analysis of graphic data collected from each reference. The features of women's undergarments obtained from the study are as follows:

First, silhouette changes of outer garments appear to influence the type and style of a new undergarment. Second, technological development results in a new type of undergarments. Third, the development of new material appears to influence functions and design of undergarments. Fourth, social changes including the development of sports affects the changes of undergarments.

As seen so far, the form or type, material, and color in undergarment diversify when fashion changes become varied and rapid. As shown before the 20th century, the importance of undergarment's type, form, and function gradually reduces according to the changes of women's mind due to their social participation, although it still plays a role in correcting the shape of an outer garment based on the outer silhouette. The design also clearly shows the extremes of maximization and minimization of decoration.

Key words : undergarment, modern fashion, lingerie, infra apparel

I. Introduction

From ancient times to now, underclothes have had various purposes in many aspects, especially for women. It, however, may be seen as the result of man's endless desire to be beautiful. In fact, undergarment in modern fashion provides women with beautiful silhouettes to satisfy their desire to have a pretty body shape, and at the same time, it contributes to the expression of their inner desire in the psychological aspect. At

the beginning of the 20th century, corsets and petticoats became useless, which played a major role in shaping a wearer's silhouette in the 19th century. As a result, the design of a structural shape is required for the garment itself, and the garment comes to acquire its own actual form making it harmonized with the body.

Moreover, women's social participation has great influence on the general costume culture resulting in big changes after the 19th century when women's wear simplifies and adopts elements from men's wear.¹⁾ Until recently, under-

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¹⁾ Moon-Sook Kim *et al.*, "A Study of Dress Features of Victorian Women Based on Social Changes," *Treatise Collection of Women's Studies*. Women's Studies Institute, (Seoul Women's Univ., 1999), 6.

garment studies are focused on its changes by periods from ancient costume to the one before modern times,²⁾ and underwear in modern fashion has rarely been dealt with. Therefore, it would be meaningful to analyze the characteristics of 20th century underwear. This study aims to classify women's undergarments of the 20th century by periods, and to examine their characteristics. The research method consists of a literature study based on relevant documentary records³⁾ and a demonstrative analysis of graphic data collected from each reference.

II. Modern Fashion and Undergarment

1. Classification of Undergarment

Having various meanings, undergarment is defined as "clothing worn under a jacket (coat, outer garment)"⁴⁾, "clothing worn under an outer garment including those next to the skin"⁵⁾, "clothing worn under an outer garment and shielded totally or almost from others"⁶⁾, or "clothes worn under an outer garment in order to prevent it from touching the skin directly"⁷⁾ in costume

dictionaries. Although the definition differs depending on the times and opinions, it is commonly agreed that "undergarment is clothing worn under an outer garment right next to the skin".

Undergarments can be divided into *foundation garments*, *underwear*, and *lingerie* according to the purpose of wearing and functions. Foundation is worn so as to supplement the body's faults or to emphasize the body shape for cultural aspects or the dress silhouette, referring to bras, girdles, corsets, waist nippers, garterbelts and bodysuits. Underwear, touching the skin directly, is worn by both men and women for physiological hygiene to keep warmth, and to protect against heat and cold by keeping dirt away and absorbing secretion from the skin. Here included are shirts, briefs, drawers, and chemises.⁸⁾ Lingerie, worn for decorative purposes, is the most decorative underclothes enhancing the effect of the outer garment's silhouette, including slips, camisoles, caminickers and bra-slips. In this study, the range of undergarments is limited to the three groups.

2. Modern Fashion and Undergarment

In the 20th century, numerous styles become

² Juae Kim, "A Study of Changes in Women's Underwear," (Master's Thesis, Gyeongsang National Univ., 1999).

Gyeongsook Oh, "A Study of The History of Undergarments," (Master's Thesis, Sungshin Women's Univ., 1985).

Sunja Lee, "A Study of Women's Undergarments," (Doctoral Thesis, Sungshin Women's Univ., 1985).

³ 1. Christina Probert. *Lingerie in Vogue*. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981).

2. Alison Carter, *Underwear - The Fashion History*. (New York: Drama Book Pub., 1992).

3. C. Willet & P. Cunningham, *The History of Underclothes*. (New York: Dover Pub., 1992).

4. R. Koda & Harold. *Infra Apparel*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993).

5. Jennifer Ruby, *Underwear*. (Batsford, 1996).

⁴ Costume Culture Association(Ed.). *Costume Encyclopedia(1)*, (Tokyo:Department of Cultural Pub., 1971), 410.

⁵ M. B. Picken, *The Fashion Dictionary*, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls. 1973), 396.

⁶ Korean Dictionary Studies Co. *Fashion Reference Book*, (Seoul:Korean Dictionary Studies Co.,1997), 859.

⁷ Korea Federation of Textile Industries, *Textile Dictionary*, (Seoul:Korea Federation of Textile Industries, 1982), 407.

⁸ Costume Culture Association (Ed.). *op. cit.*, 410-412.

a new popular fad in a short period of time due to the development of science and technology, the outbreak of the two world wars, and drastic changes in all fields including literature, thought, and economics. Many designers appear, and fashion becomes popular changing rapidly owing to the development of both the publishing industry and mass media. After Poiret succeed in abolishing corsets at the beginning of the 20th century, undergarment degrades into an obscure position in costume. At the end of the century, however, it was given a new place by progressive designers when they make it outer garments. Especially, designs based on underclothes are accepted in many places in the world despite cultural differences. The *Infra-Apparel* exhibition held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 1993 proves that undergarments' changes into outer garments was one of global fashion trends.⁹ The exhibition's outline points out that the custom of dividing costume into public and private domains is breaking down strikingly in our days.¹⁰ As for the shape, undergarment increasingly tends to adopt styles of outer garments from gay evening dresses and slip dresses, emphasizing convenience, to everyday clothes and outdoor clothes. And with dress culture appearing in street fashion, it is becoming a new item.¹¹

The transformation of undergarments into outer garments in each period may be characterized as follows: From 1890 to 1910, underclothes and house dresses were very prosperous, and the process of making lingerie including fagoting, picoting, and inseam pinking gradually starts to appear in outer garments at the beginning of the 20th century.¹² The early 20th century dress made of cotton lace and creamy

silk in <Fig. 1> was based much on silk undergarments from the 1880s and 1890s.

The soft silhouette of the 1920s and 1930s depends on highly developed weaving techniques that are used and completed in undergarment. McCardell, American utilitarian designer, tries to create the classicism of evening dresses using material which suggests night-dresses and undergarments. Sonia Rykiel and Issey Miyake, especially, express secrecy by consciously connecting techniques for lingerie to everyday clothes.¹³

<Fig. 2> shows Madeleine Vionnet's honeycomb dress made of black silk organza in 1936. Vionnet used techniques for undergarment comprehensively. This honeycomb-shaped dress emphasizes the analytic structure hidden under the fabric, and skillful temperance and transforma-



<Fig. 1> L: Semi-evening dress(1903~4).
R: Afternoon dress(1908).
(*Infra apparel*, 84)

⁹ Eunhi Choi and Miryeong Song, "Development of Dress Designs Using Infra Phenomenon", *The Research Journal of the Costume Culture*, 9(4), (2001), 549.

¹⁰ R. Koda & Harold, *Infra Apparel*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 10-11.

¹¹ Eunhi Choi & Miryeong Song, *op. cit.*, 550.

¹² Kumseok. Choi, "French Expressionism Revealed in Modern Costume", (Doctoral Thesis. Sookmyung Women's University, 1994). 92.

¹³ R. Koda, & Harold, *op. cit.*, 66.



〈Fig. 2〉 Honeycomb dress.
Madeleine Vionnet,
(*Infra apparel*, 107)



〈Fig. 3〉 Evening gown(1947). Jacques Fath
(*Infra apparel*, 58)

tion. As a result, the senses of elegance and ontology, and the visual delicacy of the dress are expressed as reason for solving problems.¹⁴⁾

〈Fig. 3〉 shows Jacques Fath's pink evening gown in 1940. Here, Fath related it to the traditional form of evening gowns which tightly fit the body giving off eroticism. Its structure belonged to the hourglass silhouette that was in fashion after World War II.

In the late 20th century, various fashions coexisted without a distinctive style or silhouette. Instead, clothes are presented to externally express a foundational motif itself. The theme of "the undergarment as an outer garment" by Westwood was sophisticated and sexy. Especially, the brassiere worn on the outer garment is presented at the 1982-3 Buffalo Girls collection and copied by many fashion designers and stylists.¹⁵⁾ The corset in 〈Fig. 4〉 restored by Yve Saint Laurent in the 1990s was characterized by silk chiffon, black tulle, and velvet decoration, and reveals the features of the post-modern age well.



〈Fig. 4〉 Corset dress. '91~92 F/W
(*YSL, Infra apparel*, 55)

As seen so far, the use of undergarment in late 20th century fashion shows systematic correlations with genderlogy, which was a costume-related conventional theme, physical and psychological pressures, and satisfaction. And

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁵ V. Steele, *Women of Fashion*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 154.

decorated and embroidered foundational motifs appear as an element of outer garments.¹⁶⁾

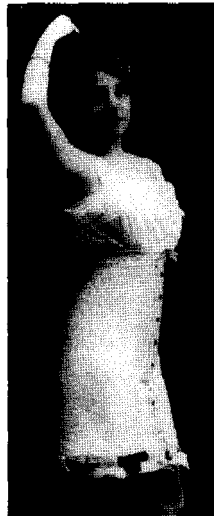
III. Analysis of Modern Women's Undergarments

The following is the results of analyzing the characteristics of 20th century women's undergarments by periods from the 1900s.

The development of technology in the 1900s had great influences on everyday life. After 1907, with the basic silhouette starting to change, the curved line of the hip decreased and eventually disappeared resulting in the advent of the straight lined corset. In addition, the support shown in (Fig. 5) disappears, the length extends, and elastic materials are introduced. The brassiere appears along with the changes in the corset form. Wealthy women of the 1900s began to look for clothes which could allow them more physical freedom in movement, and sports such as playing tennis and riding a bicycle be

come very popular. A particularly popular item was bloomers introduced by Mary Bloomer and made of thin transparent material.¹⁷⁾

Consequently, cami-knickers are worn as an undergarment, which suit the form of an outer garment as shown in (Fig. 6). One of the noticeable features of the 1910s was the changes in the corset structure. Especially, the change into the straight lined corset occurs. In the 1920s, it characteristically became even tighter, is tied with lacing, and the bust is flattened even more for the ideal straight line.¹⁸⁾ In 1914, during World War I, many women started to remove their corsets in order to work in factories or to act physically as they became deeply involved with society. And women working in armories start to wear the lace corset in (Fig. 7), since they are not allowed to wear one made of iron.¹⁹⁾ During the period of 1918~1926, the bodice and the hemline are cut straight to be crossed each other. And as for the existing corset, a pad is added to a flexible joint



〈Fig. 5〉 Corset(1913). (*Underwear*, 40)



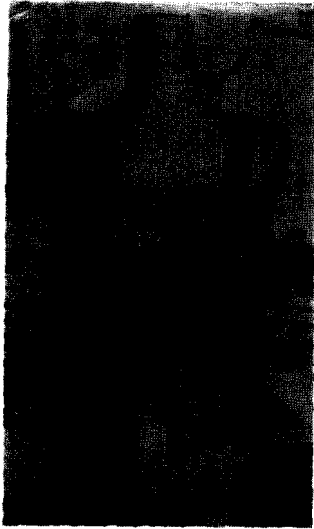
〈Fig. 6〉 Caminickers(1900). (*Underwear*, 76)

¹⁶ Kumseok Chae, E, *Aesthetics of Modern Costume*, (Seoul: Gyeongchunsa, 1985), 87.

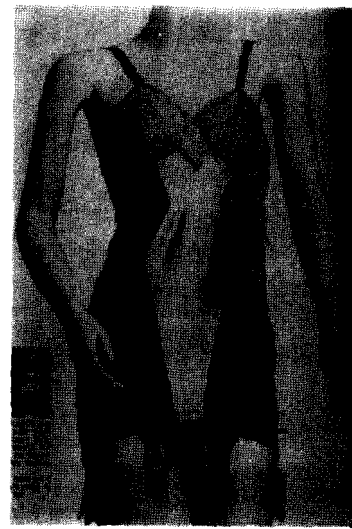
¹⁷ Goodpeople Co., Ltd. *Underwear*. (2000), 76.

¹⁸ Alison Carter, *Underwear - The Fashion History*, (New York: Drama Book Pub., 1992), 8.

¹⁹ Goodpeople Co., Ltd. *op. cit.*, 79.



〈Fig. 7〉 Corset(1920). (*Underwear*, 79)



〈Fig. 8〉 Corsette(1940). (*Underwear*, 86)

panel only at the front to present a soft hip line and a flat stomach, and narrow band-type bras are in fashion to make the flat breasts.

In the 1930s, major lingerie materials such as delicate cotton, linen, cambric, lawn, and rubber yarn, known as "latex" and developed into the brand name "Spandex" by the U.S Rubber Company, were used for lingerie production.²⁰ British version *Vogue* issued in 1935 argues "your body should not have any bulge part". Women go frantic to buy the corselette, an undergarment combining the corset with bra, with an added elastic panel (Fig. 8). Typical slips of the 1930s are cut in an oblique line, and similar to bias-cut outer garments of those days. In addition, the satin brassiere is especially popular during this period. Its whole style is delicate and fantastic with its narrow shoulder straps. And materials, different from those hard ones for the bust bodice, are used: black lace chiffon, brocade satin, and filet lace with silk lining.

The cami-knickers of the early 1940s adopt the style of darted waist in order to follow the form of full skirts that are in fashion at that

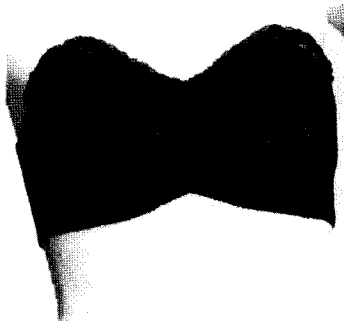
time. Silk, made of mixed yarn of wool and rayon, is popular, due to its delicate texture and easy laundry. The all-in-one is popular as well, since it is easy to wearing, and can be bought at a cheap price with a coupon.²¹ In 1946, the term "bikini" appeared, and both men and women come to enjoy wearing bikini style briefs. Moreover, trunks, boxer shorts, and panties, which tightly fit the body, are worn with the spread of knickers.

In the 1950s, an aeronautics technician Howard Hawks designs the Cantilever bra being inspired to create the bra when he sees legs dangling in the air. The strapless bra shown in (Fig. 9), which helps push the breasts upward to add volume, becomes a new popular fad during this period.²² While the waist is tightened with the wospie containing a light bone or with flexibility, the suspender belt helps flatten the stomach and hip. An all-in-oneshaped garment consisting of the bra, wospie and suspender belt is worn especially under the sheath dress to give a softly connected line under it. Although most women do not wear sophisti-

²⁰ Alison, Carter, *op. cit.*, 84.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

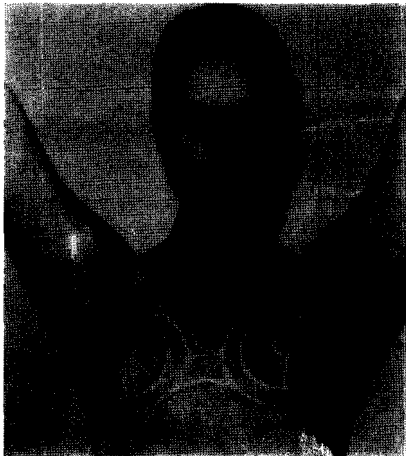
²² *Ibid.*, 84.



〈Fig. 9〉 Strapless bra(1950). (*Underwear*, 84)

cated underclothes, they wear the bra, suspender belt and stockings.

In the 1960s, bold coloring and patterns are used in undergarment. From the mid-1960s, most women wear stockings and panty girdles by joining them together, and panty girdles are designed interestingly using pop motifs.²³ The purpose is to make charming underclothes in the new age of fashionable underclothes. Also during this period, most young women think they are better off without the bra than being restricted by it. On the other hand, they start to wear the "no-bra bra" shown in 〈Fig. 10〉 to



〈Fig. 10〉 No-bra bra(1969). (*Underwear*, 133)

obtain the result of wearing no bra or a very light form.

The 1970s maintains the least underwear in the midst of constant change in the hemline as in the midi length skirt, hot pants, peasant dress, and flair pants. And long slips with the separable bra cup are in fashion for a while. Materials used in slips and petticoats develop constantly with much effort spared to make synthetic fibers such as nylon and polyester.

A-line no longer existed in the 1980s. Women adopt the little black corset accepting jeans or trousers as easily as they did with mini skirts. Particularly, the length of briefs shortens even more with high leg cut, however, low leg panties are steadily manufactured. Various underpants appear including top pants, tanga briefs, culotte slips made of nylon jersey or polycotton, and boxer shorts.

In the 1990s softer styles prevail with a loose top and tight skirt or leggings worn. And underwear as shown in 〈Fig. 11〉, which suits any taste or situation, sells widely. In addition, women start to wear boxer shorts, body stockings, and special sports bra.²⁴ As shown in 〈Fig. 12〉,



〈Fig. 11〉 Bikini underwear(1990). (*Underwear*, 49)

²³ Samho Jeong, *The Mode of Modern Fashion*, (Seoul: Kyomunsa 1996), 166.

²⁴ Alison Carter, *op. cit.*, 49-50.



〈Fig. 12〉 Bodyslayer(1940). (*Underwear*, 50)

the simplicity of underwear is expressed using stretchy lace and the tricot body shaper with various mode changes. The late 20th century brings about a great change in underwear material as a whole. Especially, it becomes possible, due to elastic fabric, to design undergarments with function and simplicity, and to emphasize the figure. The features of women's undergarments obtained from the study are as follows 〈Table 1〉.

IV. Conclusion

The features of women's undergarments obtained from the study are as follows:

First, silhouette changed of outer garments appear to influence the type and style of a new undergarment. In the early 20th century, with the appearance of the straight lined silhouette, the corset with a natural line corresponding to the body's natural silhouette was worn as an undergarment. Women are released from tight corsets when tailored suits are widespread.

Second, technological development results in a new type of undergarment. Less hard spiral wire, a new type of rubber yarn, and new textiles such as rayon or artificial silk are de-

veloped, and with them, it becomes possible to make the brassiere, corselette, cami-knickers, suspender belt, and teddy roll-on.

Third, the development of new materials appears to influence the function and design of undergarments. In the 1940s, simply designed underwear appears emphasizing practicality due to the development of various new materials equipped with the form and function of undergarment. Especially, it may be said that a revolution occurred in undergarment material as a whole in the late 20th century. Thanks to elastic fabric, lycra, in particular, it becomes possible to emphasize the figure and to design undergarments with function and simplicity.

Fourth, life style changes including the development of sports affects the changes of undergarment. After the 1970s, sports boom results in the appearance of the camisole dress, revealing part of the body, and fitting dress, as well as items like boxer shorts, body stockings and sports bras. Also such influence is shown in outer garments causing underclothes' change into outer garments in modern fashion with motifs obtained from the corset, all-in-one, bra, and garterbelt.

As seen so far, the form or type, material, and color in undergarment diversify when fashion changes become varied and rapid. As shown before the 20th century, the importance of undergarment's type, form, and function gradually reduced according to the changes of women's mind due to their social participation, although it still plays a role in correcting the shape of an outer garment based on the outer silhouette. The design also clearly shows the extremes of maximization and minimization of decoration.

This study is limited to the analysis of important features of undergarment by periods excluding its detailed features by types. Following studies would be meaningful to analyze designs of underwear by types, and to analyze and compare its changes in relation to outer garments.

〈Table 1〉 Characteristics of 20th Century Women's Undergarment

Periods	Characteristics	Material/Detail
1900s/ 1910s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Straight lined, slim silhouette · Bra with separated bust and waist, corset waist/hip adjusted · Fuller petticoat · Released from corset · Pastel shades prevail: peach, pink, ivory, green 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cotton, chiffon, crêpe de chine, bracaded satin, batiste, silk · Thread work, embroidery
1920s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Embroidery, hand-made lingerie with lace trimming · sheath dress-type slip · Narrow band-type bra in fashion · Handkerchief hemline appeared in underslip · All-in-one, cami-knickers, cami-bocker cami-petticoat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Silk crepe · Knit(silk tricot, silk/wool blend, wool, rayon) · Art Deco style print, Opaque silk
1930s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Corselette, girdle, belt, step-in, roll-on · Corselette combining corset with brassieres · All-in-one, 2-way stretch foundation developed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cotton, linen, cambric, lawn, artificial silk
1940s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Influence of World War II · Corset reappears · Tight panties, trucks, boxer shorts prevail because of bikini and knickers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cotton, sateen, rayon satin, crepe, wool, silk(wool/rayon mixed), linen, nylon tricot, polyester
1950s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Strapless bra, corselette · Foam rubber pad added to the hip and ruffled · Paper nylon petticoat · Frou-frou petticoat made of frill and starched meshes in vogue · Straight slip · Underwear develops through mass media, brief puff panties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cotton, polyester, acrylic, lycra, rayon, · Nylon net, terylene(nylon/ polyester blend)
1960s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Various transformations of underwear including bra and girdle of different materials · Body stockings, lycra panty corselette 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cotton, silk, Lycra, nylon, terylene
1970s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Tights joined with panties, halter neck, body shaper, underwear revealing body line, disposable panties are sold · Outer garment's unisex style reflected in underwear too · Fancy lingerie like French knickers, thin negligee, and sexy suspender appeared in revival mood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cotton, silk, Lycra, nylon, polyester, elastane
1980s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Complex design printed and various patterns/embroideries used on stretch material fitting in with square shoulders/slim skirt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cotton, polyester, acrylic, Lycra, rayon, damask, polyviscos, elastic lace
1990s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Handmade underwear(made for a few people) · Boxer shorts, tanga briefs, body stockings, special sports bra 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cotton, polyester, acrylic, Lycra, rayon, nylon

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